# **Obesity declared a disease by U.S. medical group, millions affected**

WASHINGTON — The American Medical Association voted Tuesday to declare obesity a disease. The move now defines 78 million American adults and 12 million children as having a medical condition requiring treatment.

The AMA is the nation’s leading organization of doctors. The group voted after debating whether the action would do more to help affected patients get treatment, or would add more shame to the complicated condition.

The AMA's own experts had offered cautionary advice against the move. But in the end, it decided to extend the new disease status. [Obesity](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity) is a condition that affects almost 36 percent of adults and 12 percent of children in the United States.

“Recognizing obesity as a disease will help change the way the medical community tackles this complex issue,” said Dr. Patrice Harris, an AMA board member.

## Pressure On Insurers

Tuesday’s vote is certain to step up pressure on health insurance companies. There is demand for the companies to reimburse doctors for the time-consuming task of discussing obesity’s health risks with patients. It should also encourage doctors to direct these patients to weight-loss programs and to monitor their progress.

Anyone with a body mass index greater than 30 is considered obese. The body mass index is a measurement of body fat based on weight and height. A person 5 feet 4 inches tall weighing 175 pounds has a BMI of 30. For a person 6 feet tall, a weight of 221 pounds equals a BMI of 30.

Medicare already covers the costs of “intensive behavioral therapy” for obese patients. It also pays for surgery for those with additional health conditions. The federally funded program insures an estimated 13 million obese Americans who are over 65 or disabled. But not all private insurers cover such obesity treatments.

Insurers in the California Association of Health Plans cover many services to treat medical conditions associated with obesity, said chief executive Patrick Johnston. Those services include bariatric surgery, an operation to reduce the size of the stomach.

## Obliged To Diagnose And Discuss

The AMA’s decision means physicians now have an obligation to diagnose obesity and recommend treatment. That should encourage more primary care physicians to talk about weight with their patients. Studies have found that more than half of obese patients have never been told by a doctor they need to lose weight.

Doctors are reluctant not only because they don't want to offend their patient, but they may also be unwilling to start a lengthy conversation for which they won't be paid. Past AMA documents have referred to obesity as an “urgent chronic condition,” a “major health concern” and a “complex disorder.” The vote now lifts obesity above the status of a health condition or disorder.

“As things stand now, primary care physicians tend to look at obesity as a behavior problem,” said Dr. Rexford Ahima of the University of Pennsylvania. “This will force primary care physicians to address it, even if we don’t have a cure for it.”

There has been a steep 30-year run-up in Americans’ weight. The resulting tidal wave of expensive health problems like type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease has been an area of growing public concern. Treatment of such obesity-related diseases drives up the nation’s medical bill by more than $150 billion a year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That figure could rise by an additional $550 billion over the next 20 years, a recent Duke University study concluded.

## "A Double-Edged Sword"

The AMA argued that recognizing obesity as a disease could lead to new treatments. The Food and Drug Administration, which has approved just two new prescription weight-loss medications since 1999, could face increased pressure to approve new obesity drugs. That could spur new drug development and more widespread prescribing by physicians, the council noted.

Labeling obesity a disease also might boost support for prevention programs such as physical education and reforms to school lunch, the AMA added. It could also lead to employers covering obesity treatments for their employees. Companies could be less able to discriminate on the basis of body weight, the AMA suggested.

But the council also said that making obesity a disease could deepen the stigma associated with being overweight. It could doom some patients to endless nagging — even if they were otherwise healthy or had lost enough weight to improve their health.

It might also shift focus toward expensive drug and surgical treatments and away from healthy diets and regular exercise, the AMA wrote.

Dr. Daniel H. Bessesen, an obesity expert at the University of Colorado, called the AMA’s shift “a double-edged sword.” While the label change may reflect “a growing awareness that obesity is not someone’s fault,” he worried that the term disease may make people feel ashamed. People who are obese don't need to feel any more shame, he added.